

**United Nations General Assembly
Sixtieth session
Seventy seventh plenary meeting
Agenda item 73 (c)**

**Special commemorative meeting
to observe the twentieth anniversary
of the Chernobyl catastrophe**

28 April 2006

Statement by

**Ambassador Andrei Dapkiunas
Permanent Representative
of the Republic of Belarus
to the United Nations**

On behalf of the Government of Belarus, on behalf of my compatriots I would like to thank you for being here. We take your presence in this hall as an encouraging sign that there indeed remain many people in the world for whom the tragedy of 20 years ago has not become a mere footnote in the history of civilian nuclear energy.

Similarly – with greatest respect and gratitude – we recall today each of the sixty nine partner countries who co-sponsored the comprehensive resolution of the General Assembly on Chernobyl last year.

By the tragic whim of fate **Belarus, by far the smallest of the three most affected countries, took the heaviest blow from that nuclear disaster.** Seventy deadly per cent of the total radioactive fallout of Chernobyl settled over the territory of Belarus. One fifth of the country's territory remains contaminated with radionuclides. The overall damage to Belarus as a result of the disaster was estimated by the United Nations experts at US\$ 235 billion. One can say that Belarus is one of the few countries in the world whose work to achieve the Millennium Development Goals is virtually overcast with a sinister radioactive shadow.

What has been rightly defined as the world's worst technological disaster of the nuclear age for Belarus came to be nothing less than **a national calamity.**

In terms of depth of humanitarian tragedy, in terms of gravity of human perception and reaction, in terms of rupturing the social fabric of the Belarusian society the Chernobyl tragedy is the next closest thing to the lingering legacy of the last world war.

The War and Chernobyl are of the worst scars on the soul of Belarus. They are critical and indispensable for understanding the mindset and syncing in with the heartbeat of ordinary Belarusians.

As it was and will be said today, much has been accomplished in the past twenty years in dealing with the aftermath of the disaster. Much has been done by the people of Belarus themselves. More than US\$ 17 billion were spent to deal with the

post-Chernobyl problems in Belarus, including the resettlement of 140 thousand people.

Significant and much needed was the assistance of our foreign partners – both from governments and civil society. These tokens of compassion and friendly support will never be forgotten by Belarusians. Such noble gestures build the most durable foundation for the open and trustworthy relations between peoples and states.

The new strategy for recovery and sustainable development of the affected regions was in the focus of attention of a recent landmark Chernobyl event – the International Minsk Conference which completed its work a week ago.

To underline the specific nature of challenges faced by the countries most affected by the Chernobyl disaster and the need for developing a comprehensive and streamlined framework for the multilateral Chernobyl cooperation, the Minsk Conference suggested proclaiming **the years 2006-2016 the International Decade for the recovery and sustainable development of the regions affected by the Chernobyl disaster**. We hope that this initiative will get the support of the Member States. Belarus also counts on the strong leadership of UNDP in implementation of this initiative.

There are things which Belarus needs to overcome the damage caused by Chernobyl. In the past years we have been paying particular attention to the long-term medical and environmental consequences of the disaster. We are thankful to the donor countries and international organisations that help us in these studies. Diagnostics and early detection of cancer and cardiovascular diseases, especially in children, is one of our biggest needs and concerns. To address this task effectively we badly need modern medical equipment.

But there are also things which Belarus can share with the world – through its knowledge, experience and foresight. For instance, the Minsk Conference spoke in favour of putting to wider and better use the acknowledged experience of Belarusian Chernobyl and nuclear scientific community. In particular, this concerns the long-brewing issue of enlargement of the United Nations Scientific Committee on the Effects of the Atomic Radiation. For many years the composition of this Committee remains unchanged despite the new challenges and problems which have arisen in the field of radiation protection. The Minsk International Conference has suggested to the General Assembly that this issue be addressed as a matter of practical urgency. Belarus, as well as other countries affected by the Chernobyl disaster, should be duly represented in the Committee.

It is in the national character of Belarusians to be self-reliant. Our tragic and turbulent history has taught our people to expect very little from the outside world. Over the years Belarusians have got used to accept tragic ‘gifts’ of history with patience and resilience. In Belarus there is even a poetic notion of the national ‘cross of suffering’ which the people of the land will carry no matter what.

This is why Belarus will not be interested in proposing yet another international decade in the form of a PR or paperwork exercise. Nor we vie for an undeserved piece of the global development assistance pie. Belarus will not try to shift the responsibility for the recovery and development of the affected regions onto anybody.

What we really ask for is a concerned and honest engagement. What we hope for is the international decade of sincere human attention and solidarity with the people who continue to confront the dangers of Chernobyl. We hope for the wider understanding of the fact that the problem of Chernobyl has never been local or regional. The brave and responsible understanding of it as a global challenge, as a global concern. I have to admit that this understanding sometimes eludes us.

The 20th anniversary of the disaster has seen the resumption of the heated international public debate on the scale and gravity of consequences of Chernobyl and essentially on the continuing relevance of the disaster. There are conflicting assessments, disparate approaches.

The Vienna UN Chernobyl Forum concluded that there is a need for further study of medical and environmental effects of the Chernobyl disaster. This important finding highlights **the need for a sophisticated and balanced approach to the problems of Chernobyl**. The approach which would never dismiss in passing any alternative wisdom and opinions, no matter how inconvenient or seditious they might seem.

Chernobyl constantly reminds us of how little we know and how much we have to learn about the things we thought we have fully mastered. Whether we have the courage to admit it or not, by attempting to harness the most powerful available source of energy the humanity has unleashed the risks and dangers of the unknown kind – as much terrible as unseen.

It was exactly two years today that the Award winning ‘Chernobyl Heart’ documentary was screened in this very hall. It dealt with the work of the Chernobyl Children's Project International, an international organisation that works with children and communities affected by the Chernobyl disaster. Today I would like to cite the words of the founder of this organisation who was prominently featured in that documentary and who by virtue of her accomplishments wields the strongest moral authority both in her native Ireland and in Belarus, Ms Adi Roche:

“[People] ask: “How many people have died? How many will die? Is this or that cancer or illness definitively caused by radiation? What is Chernobyl? How much radiation were you exposed to? Why do you all look so healthy? Show me the evidence?” These are questions with often non-specific answers or answers to that do not satisfy the required neat logic.

We seek absolutes in situations where there can be no absolutes, no definitive answers, for we ask the wrong questions. People expect to see something grotesque and distorted and are almost disappointed when people and things appear normal – the media are perplexed. But such expectations distract from the true effects, with no realization that any dose radiation is an overdose.

If we continue to seek only logical and rational answers we will constantly be diverted from the true picture – a picture of human fragility, a picture of how delicately balanced the relationship between man and nature is. ...as long as we try and place Chernobyl within our existing understanding of catastrophes, understanding it will continue to elude us. Our experiences from other disasters are clearly inadequate because we are facing a realm of the unknown not previously experienced, requiring a new understanding, a new bravery, and a new kind of courage”.

We in Belarus admire the noble individuals, organisations and governments who have remained honest, compassionate and focused on the plight of the victims of Chernobyl through all those twenty years.

We admire their courage in facing the truth about Chernobyl. We admire their steadfast and deeply humane dedication to helping those who are in need. All of these good Samaritans were and remain an invaluable source of support and inspiration for Belarusian people.

It would be impossible to mention all those people at this meeting so I would like to seize this opportunity to mention and honour at least some of the outstanding personalities who forged the system of UN coordination and cooperation on Chernobyl and who continue working side by side with us:

former UN coordinator on Chernobyl, President of the General Assembly Jan Eliasson,
former UN coordinator on Chernobyl, Ambassador Kenzo Oshima,
former UN coordinator on Chernobyl, Under-Secretary-General Jan Egeland.

There are also a number of guests invited to this meeting who over the years have selflessly sacrificed the fire of their soul in the name of the needy children in a distant land:

Mr Donald Cairns, the founder of the Ramapo Children of Chernobyl project;
the wonderful team of the Chernobyl Children's Project International:
Ms Kathy Ryan and Ms Sherrie Douglas.

Thank you all ever so much.